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THE EARL'S RETURN

OWEN MEREDITH





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The Earl's Return.





THE EARL'S RETURN

BY

OWEN MEREDITH, *author*

Formerly Robert & Barbara - Hylton, 1st Earl of Hylton

ILLUSTRATED BY W. L. TAYLOR

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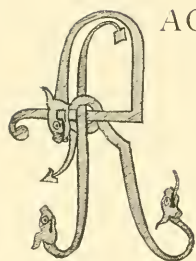
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THE EARL'S RETURN.



AGGED and tall stood the castle wall,
And the Squires, at their sport, in the great
South Court,
Lounged all day long from stable to hall
Laughingly, lazily, one and all.
The land about was barren and blue,
And swept by the wing of the wet sea-mew.
Seven fishermen's huts on a shelly shore:

Sand-heaps behind, and sand-banks before:
And a black champaign streaked white all through
To a great salt pool which the ocean drew,
Sucked into itself, and disgorged it again
To stagnate and steam on the mineral plain;
Not a tree or a bush in the circle of sight,
But a bare black thorn which the sea-winds had withered
With the drifting scum of the surf and blight,
And some patches of gray grass-land to the right,
Where the lean red-hided cattle were tethered:
A reef of rock wedged the water in twain,
And a stout stone tower stood square to the main.



And the Squires, at their sports
in the great South Court
Lounged all day long from stable to hall
Laughingly, lazily,
one and all.

And the flakes of the spray that were jerked away
From the froth on the lip of the bleak blue sea
Were sometimes flung by the wind, as it swung
Over turret and terrace and balcony,
To the garden below where, in desolate corners
Under the mossy green parapet there,
The lilies crouched, rocking their white heads like
mourners,
And burned off the heads of the flowers that were
Pining and pale in their comfortless bowers,
Dry-bushed with the sharp stubborn lavender,



And paven with disks of the torn sunflowers,
Which, day by day, were strangled, and stripped
Of their ravelling fringes and brazen bosses,
And the hardy mary-buds nipped and ripped
Into shreds for the beetles that lurked in the mosses.

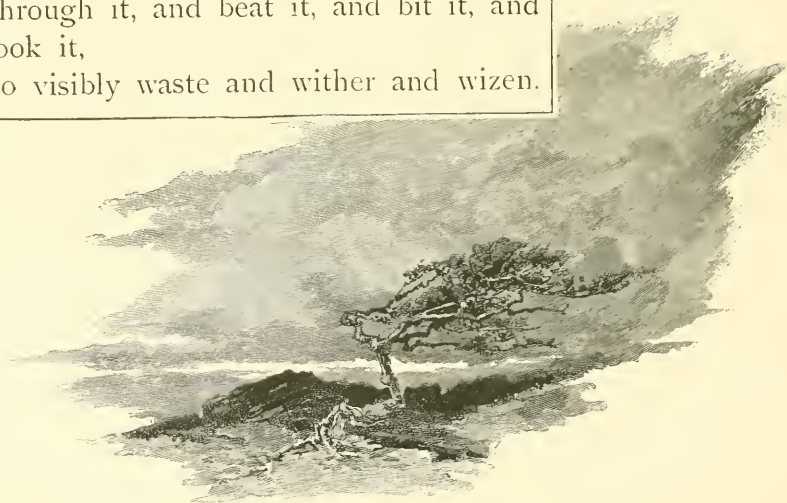




Here she lived alone, and from year to year
She saw the black belt of the ocean appear
At her casement each morn as she rose; and each morn
Her eye fell first on the bare black thorn.
This was all: nothing more: or sometimes on the shore
The fishermen sang when the fishing was o'er;
Or the lowing of oxen fell dreamily,
Close on the shut of the glimmering eves,
Through some gusty pause in the moaning sea,
When the pools were splashed pink by the thirsty beeves.
Or sometimes, when the pearl-lighted morns drew the tinges
Of the cold sunrise up their amber fringes,
A white sail peered over the rim of the main,
Looked all about o'er the empty sea,
Staggered back from the fine line of white light again,
And dropped down to another world silently.
Then she breathed freer. With sickening dread
She had watched five pale young moons unfold
From their notchy cavern in light, and spread
To the fuller light, and again grow old,
And dwindle away to a luminous shred.



“He will not come back till the Spring’s green and gold.
And I would that I with the leaves were dead,
Quiet somewhere with them in the moss and the mould,
When he and the summer come this way,” she said.
And when the dull sky darkened down to the edges,
And the keen frost kindled in star and spar,
The sea might be known by a noise on the ledges
Of the long crags, gathering power from afar
Through his roaring bays, and crawling back
Hissing, as o’er the wet pebbles he dragged
His skirt of foam frayed, dripping, and jagged,
And reluctantly fell down the smooth hollow shell
Of the night, whose lustrous surface of black
In spots to an intense blue was worn.
But later, when up on the sullen sea-bar
The wide large-lighted moon had arisen,
Where the dark and voluminous ocean grew luminous,
Helping after her slowly one little shy star
That shook blue in the cold, and looked forlorn,
The clouds were troubled, and the wind from his prison
Behind them leaped down with a light laugh of scorn;
Then the last thing she saw was that bare black thorn;
For the forkèd tree, as the bleak blast took it,
Howled through it, and beat it, and bit it, and
shook it,
Seemed to visibly waste and wither and wizen.





And the snow was lifted into the air
Layer by layer,
And turned into vast white clouds that flew
Silent and fleet up the sky, and were riven
And jerked into chasms which the sun
 leaped through,
Opening crystal gulfs of a breezy blue
Fed with rainy lights of the April heaven.
From eaves and leaves the quivering dew
Sparkled off; and the rich earth, black
 and bare,
Was starred with snowdrops everywhere;
And the crocus upturned its flame, and
 burned
Here and there.

“The Summer,” she said, “cometh blithe
 and bold;
And the crocus is lit for her welcoming;
And the days will have garments of purple
 and gold;
But I would be left by the pale green
 Spring
With the snowdrops somewhere under
 the mould;
For I dare not think what the Summer
 may bring.”



Pale she was as the bramble blooms
That fill the long fields with their faint perfumes,
When the May-wind flits finely through sun-threaded
showers,
Breathing low to himself in his dim meadow-bowers.
And her cheek each year was paler and thinner,
And white as the pearl that was hung at her ear,
As her sad heart sickened and pined within her,
And failed and fainted from year to year.
So that the Seneschal, rough and gray,
Said, as he looked in her face one day,
“Saint Catherine save all good souls, I pray,
For our pale young lady is paling away.
Oh the Saints,” he said, smiling bitter and grim,
“Know she’s too fair and too good for him!”
Sometimes she walked on the upper leads,
And leaned on the arm of the weather-worn Warden.
Sometimes she sat ’twixt the mildewy beds
Of the sea-singed flowers in the Pleasaunce Garden.
Till the rotting blooms that lay thick on the walks
Were combed by the white sea-gust like a rake,
And the stimulant steam of the leaves and stalks
Made the coiled memory, numb and cold,
That slept in her heart like a dreaming snake,
Drowsily lift itself fold by fold,
And gnaw and gnaw hungrily, half awake.



Sometimes
she sat 'twixt the midday beds
Of the sea-singed flowers -
in the Pleasure Garden.

Sometimes she looked from the window below
To the great South Court, and the Squires, at their sport,
Loungingly loitering to and fro.
She heard the grooms there as they cursed one another.
She heard the great bowls falling all day long
In the bowling-alleys. She heard the song
Of the shock-headed Pages that drank without stint in
The echoing courts, and swore hard at each other.
She saw the red face of the rough wooden Quintin,
And the swinging sand-bag ready to smother
The awkward Squire that missed the mark.
And, all day long, between the dull noises
Of the bowls, and the oaths, and the singing voices,
The sea boomed hoarse till the skies were dark.

But when the swallow, that sweet new-comer,
Floated over the sea in the front of the summer,
The salt dry sands burned white, and sickened
Men's sight in the glaring horn of the bay;
And all things that fasten, or float at ease
In the silvery light of the leprous seas
With the pulse of a hideous life were quickened,
Fell loose from the rocks, and crawled crosswise away,
Slippery sidelong crabs, half strangled
By the white sea grasses in which they were tangled,
And those half-living creatures, orbèd, rayed, and sharp-
 angled,
Fan-fish, and star-fish, and polypous lumps,
Hueless and boneless, that languidly thickened,
Or flat-faced, or spikèd, or ridgèd with humps,
Melting off from their clotted clusters and clumps
Sprawled over the shore in the heat of the day.



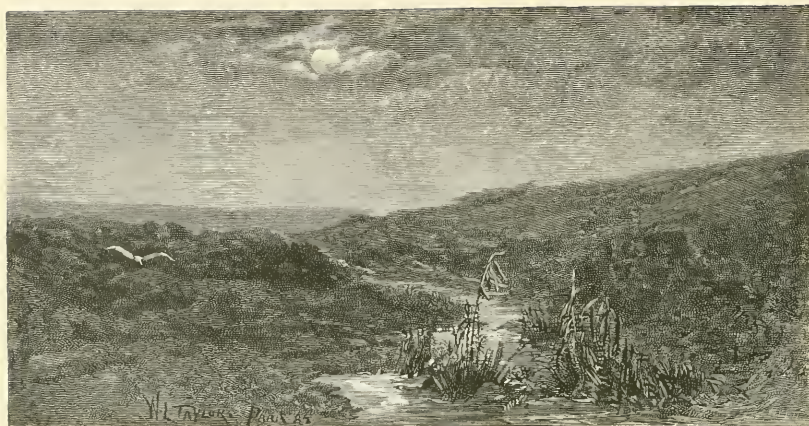
An hour before the sun was set
A darker ripple rolled over the sea;
The white rocks quivered in wells of jet;
And the great West, opening breathlessly
Up all his inmost orange, gave
Hints of something distant and sweet
That made her heart swell; far up the wave
The clouds that lay piled in the golden heat
Were turned into types of the ancient mountains
In an ancient land; the weeds, which forlorn
Waves were swaying neglectfully,
By their sound, as they dipped into sparkles that
 dripped
In the emerald creeks that ran up from the shore,
Brought back to her fancy the bubble of fountains
Leaping and falling continually
In valleys where she should wander no more.



And when, over all of these, the night
Among her mazy and milk-white signs,
And clustered orbs, and zigzag lines,
Burst into blossom of stars and light,
The sea was glassy; the glassy brine
Was paven with lights,—blue, crystalline,
And emerald keen; the dark world hung
Balanced under the moon, and swung
In a net of silver sparkles. Then she
Rippled her yellow hair to her knee,
Bared her warm white bosom and throat,
And from the lattice leaned athirst.
There, on the silence did she gloat
With a dizzy pleasure steeped in pain,
Half catching the soul of the secret that blended
God with his starlight, then feeling it vain,
Like a pining poet ready to burst
With the weight of the wonder that grows in his brain,
Or a nightingale, mute at the sound of a lute
That is swelling and breaking his heart with its strain,
Waiting, breathless, to die when the music is ended.

For the sleek and beautiful midnight stole,
Like a faithless friend, her secret care,
Crept through each pore to the source of the soul,
And mocked at the anguish which he found there,
Shining away from her, scornful and fair
In his pitiless beauty, refusing to share
The discontent which he could not control.

The water-rat, as he skulked in the moat,
Set all the slumbrous lilies afloat,
And sent a sharp quick pulse along
The stagnant light, that heaved and swung
The leaves together. Suddenly
At times a shooting star would spin
Shell-like out of heaven, and tumble in,
And burst o'er a city of stars; but she,
As he dashed on the back of the zodiac,
And quivered and glowed down arc and node,
And split sparkling into infinity,
Thought that some angel, in his reveries
Thinking of earth, as he pensively
Leaned over the star-grated balcony
In his palace among the Pleiades,
And grieved for the sorrow he saw in the land,
Had dropped a white lily from his loose hand.

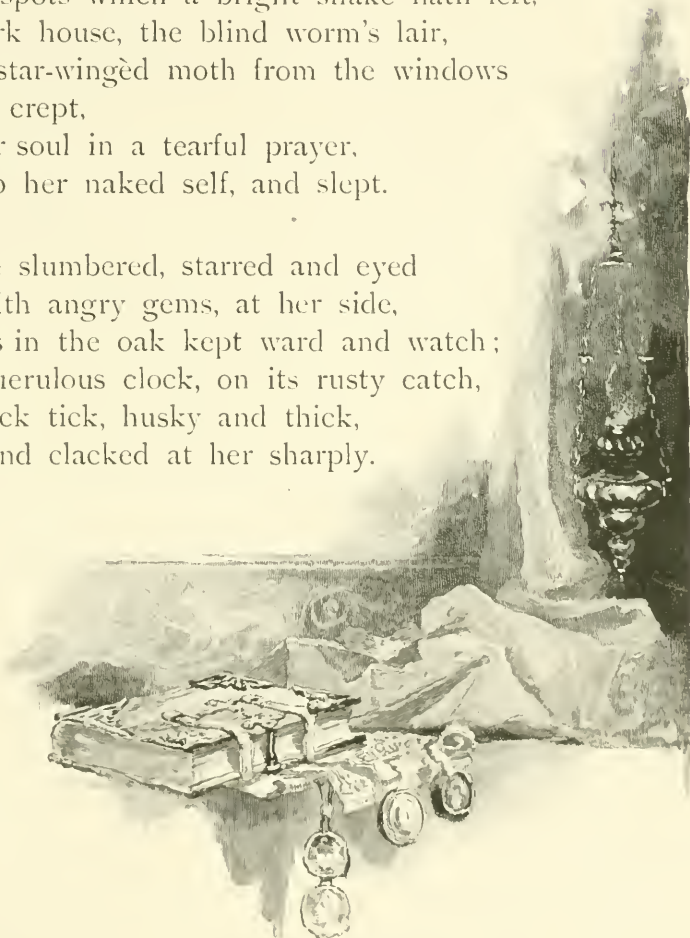


And thus many a night, steeped pale in the light
Of the stars, when the bells and clocks
Had ceased in the towers, and the sound of the
 hours
Was eddying about in the rocks,
Deep-sunken in bristling broidery between the black
 oak Fiends sat she,
And under the moth-flitted canopy
Of the mighty antique bed in her chamber,
With wild eyes drinking up the sea,
And her white hands heavy with jewelry,
Flashing as she loosed languidly
Her satins of snow and of amber.



And as, fold by fold, these were rippled and rolled
To her feet, and lay huddled in ruins of gold,
She looked like some pale spirit above
Earth's dazzling passions forever flung by,
Freed from the stains of an earthly love,
And those splendid shackles of pride that press
On the heart till it aches with the gorgeous stress,
Quitting the base Past remorsefully.
And so she put by the coil and care
Of the day that lay furled like an idle weft
Of heaped spots which a bright snake hath left,
Or that dark house, the blind worm's lair,
When the star-wingèd moth from the windows
hath crept,
Steeped her soul in a tearful prayer,
Shrank into her naked self, and slept.

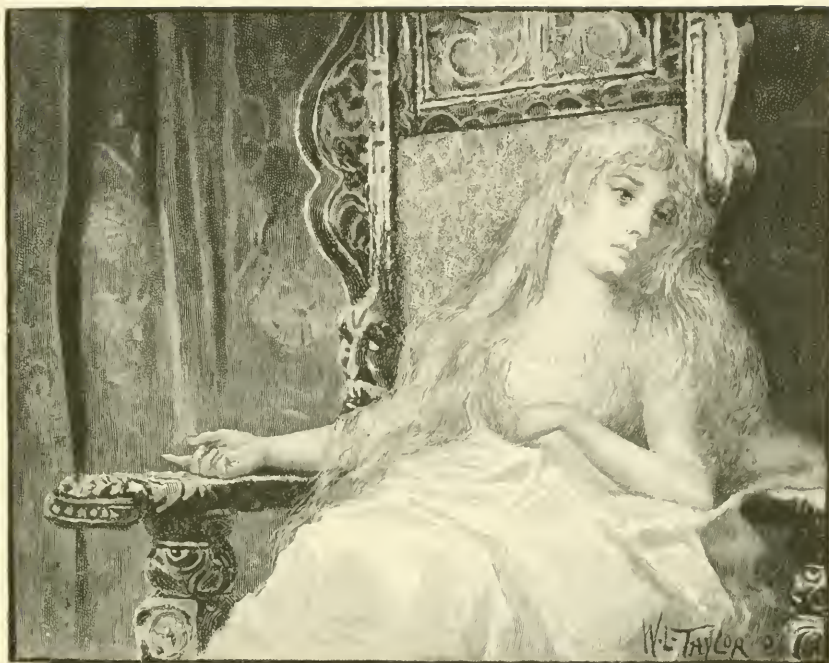
And as she slumbered, starred and eyed
All over with angry gems, at her side,
The Fiends in the oak kept ward and watch;
And the querulous clock, on its rusty catch,
With a quick tick, husky and thick,
Clamored and clacked at her sharply.



There was

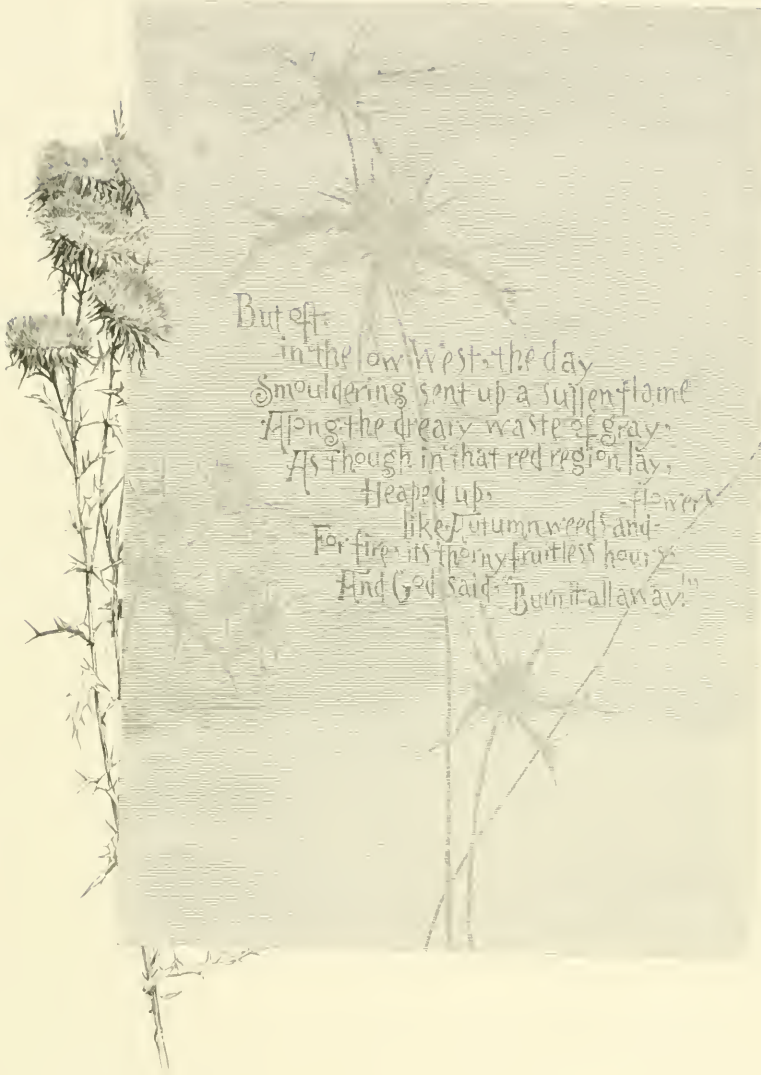
(Fronting a portrait of the Earl)
A shrine with a dim green lamp, and a cross
Of glowing cedar wreathed with pearl,
Which the Arimathæan, so it was writ,
When he came from the holy Orient,
Had worn, with his prayers embalming it,
As with the San-Grael through the world he went.
Underneath were relics and gems
From many an antique king-saint's crown,
And some ('t was avouched) from the dusk diadems
And mighty rings of those Wise Kings
That evermore sleep 'mid the marble stems,
'Twixt chancel and chalice in God his palace,
The marvel of Cologne Town.
In a halo dim of the lamp all night
Smiled the sad Virgin, holy and white,
With a face as full of the soul's affliction
As one that had looked on the Crucifixion.

At moonrise the land was suddenly brighter;
And through all its length and breadth the casement
Grew large with a luminous strange amazement,
And, as doubting in dreams what that sudden blaze meant,
The Lady's white face turned a thought whiter.
Sometimes in sleep light finger-tips
Touched her behind; the pain, the bliss
Of a long slow despairing kiss
Doubled the heat on her feverish lips,
And down to her heart's-heart smouldering burned;
From lips long mute she heard her name;
Sad dreams and sweet to vex her came;
Sighing, upon her pillow she turned,
Like a weary waif on a weary sea
That is heaving over continually,
And finds no course, until for its sake
The heart of the silence begins to ache.



Unsoothed from slumber she awoke
An hour ere dawn. The lamp burned faint.
The Fiends glared at her out of the oak.
She rose, and fell at the shrine of the Saint.
There with clasped hands to the Mother
Of many sorrows, in sorrow, she prayed;
Till all things in the room melted into each other,
And vanished in gyres of flickering shade,
Leaving her all alone, with the face
Of the Saint growing large in its one bright place.
Then on a sudden, from far, a fear
Through all her heart its horror drew,
As of something hideous growing near.
Cold fingers seemed roaming through her damp hair;
Her lips were locked. The power of prayer
Left her. She dared not turn. She knew,
From his panel atilt on the wall up there,
The grim Earl was gazing her through and through.





But off
in the low West, the day
Smouldering sent up a sullen flame
Along the dreary waste of gray.
As though in that red region lay,
Heaped up, ^{flowers} like Pagan weeds and
For fire, its thorny fruitless hours
And God said: "Burn it all away."

But when the casement, a grisly square,
Flickered with day, she flung it wide,
And looked below. The shore was bare.
In the mist tumbled the dismal tide.
One ghastly pool seemed solid white;
The forkèd shadow of the thorn
Fell through it, like a raven rent
In the steadfast blank down which it went.
The blind world slowly gathered sight.
The sea was moaning on to morn.

And the Summer into the Autumn waned.
And under the watery Hyades
The gray sea swelled, and the thick sky rained,
And the land was darkened by slow degrees.
But oft, in the low West, the day
Smouldering sent up a sullen flame
Along the dreary waste of gray,
As though in that red region lay,
Heaped up, like Autumn weeds and flowers
For fire, its thorny fruitless hours,
And God said, "Burn it all away!"

When all was dreariest in the skies,
And the gusty tract of twilight muttered,
A strange slow smile grew into her eyes,
As though from a great way off it came
And was weary ere down to her lips it fluttered,
And turned into a sigh, or some soft name
Whose syllables sounded likest sighs,
Half smothered in sorrow before they were uttered.



When all was dreariest in the skies,
And the gushy track of twilight muttered,
A strange slow smile grew into her eyes,
As though from a great way off it came
And was weary ere down to her lip's it fluttered,
And turned into a sigh,

Sometimes, at night, a music was rolled —
A ripple of silver harp-strings cold —
From the halls below where the Minstrel sung,
With the silver hair, and the golden tongue,
And the eyes of passionless, peaceful blue
(Like twilight which faint stars gaze through),
Wise with the years which no man knew.
And first the music, as though the wings
Of some blind angel were caught in the strings,
Fluttered with weak endeavor: anon
The uncaged heart of music grew bold
And cautiously loosened, length by length,
The golden cone of its great undertone,
Like a strong man using mild language to one
That is weaker, because he is sure of his strength.

But once — and it was at the fall of the day,
When she, if she closed her eyes, did seem
To be wandering far, in a sort of dream,
With some lost shadow, away, away,
Down the heart of a golden land which she
Remembered a great way over the sea,
There came a trample of horses and men;
And a blowing of horns at the castle gate;
Then a clattering noise; then a pause; and then,
With the sudden jerk of a heavy weight,
And a wrangling and jangling and clinking and clanking,
The sound of the falling of cable and chain;
And a grumbling over the dewy planking
That shrieked and sung with the weight and strain;
And the rough Seneschal bawled out in the hall,
“The Earl and the Devil are come back again!”



Her heart stood still for a moment or more.
Then suddenly tugged, and strained, and tore
At the roots, which seemed to give way beneath.
She rushed to the window, and held her breath.
High up on the beach were the long black ships,
And the brown sails hung from the masts in strips;
And the surf was whirled over and over them,
And swept them dripping from stern to stem.
Within, in the great square court below,
Were a hundred rough-faced men, or so.
And one or two pale fair-haired slaves
Whom the Earl had brought over the winter waves.

There was a wringing of horny hands;
And a swearing of oaths; and a great deal of laughter;
The grim Earl growling his hoarse commands
To the Warden that followed him growling after;
A lowing of cattle along the wet sands;
And a plashing of hoofs on the slippery rafter,
As the long-tailed black-maned horses each
Went over the bridge from the gray sea-beach.



For she heard below,
On the creaking stairway loud and slow,
Like drops that plunge audibly down from the thunder
Into a sea that is greaning under,
The heavy foot of the Earl as he mounted
Step after step to the turret:



Then quoth the grim Earl, "Fetch me a stoop!"
And they brought him a great bowl that dripped from the
brim,

Which he seized upon with a satisfied whoop,
Drained, and flung at the head of him
That brought it; then, with a laugh like a howl,
Stroked his beard; and strode in through the door with a
growl.

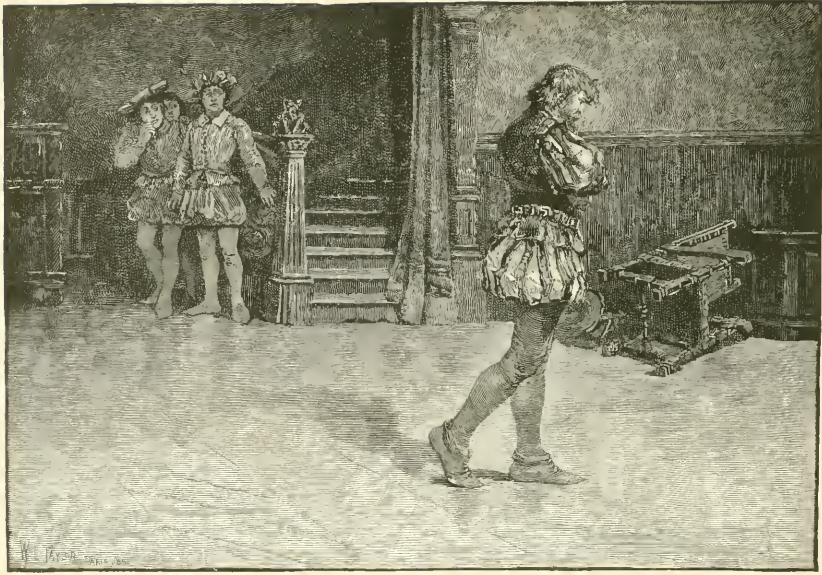
Meanwhile the pale lady grew white and whiter,
As the poplar pales when the keen winds smite her:
And, as the tree sways to the gust, and heaves
Quick ripples of white alarm up the leaves,
So did she seem to shrink and reel
From the casement — one quiver from head to heel
Of whitest fear. For she heard below,
On the creaking stairway loud and slow,
Like drops that plunge audibly down from the thunder
Into a sea that is groaning under,
The heavy foot of the Earl as he mounted
Step after step to the turret: she counted
Step after step, as he hastened or halted;
Now clashing shrill through the archways vaulted;

Now muffled and thick; now loud, and more
Loud as he came near the chamber door.
Then there fell, with a rattle and shock,
An iron glove on the iron lock,
And the door burst open—the Earl burst through it—
But she saw him not. The window-pane,
Far off, grew large and small again;
The staggering light did wax and wane,
Till there came a snap of the heavy brain;
And a slow-subsiding pulse of pain;
And the whole world darkened into rest,
As the grim Earl pressed to his grausome breast
His white wife. She hung heavy there
On his shoulder without breath,
Darkly filled with sleepy death
From her heart up to her eyes;
Dead asleep: and ere he knew it
(How Death took her by surprise
Helpless in her great despair)
Smoothing back her yellow hair,
He kissed her icy brows; unwound
His rough arms, and she fell to the ground.

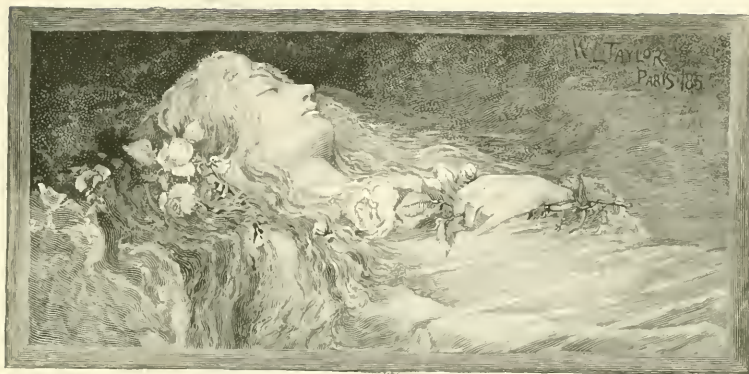
*"The woman was fairer than she was wise:
But the serpent was wiser than she was fair:
For the serpent was lord in Paradise
Or ever the woman came there.
But when Eden-gates were barred amain,
And the fiery sword on guard in the East,
The lion arose from a long repose,
And quoth he, as he shook out his royal mane,
'Now I am the strongest beast.'
Had the woman been wiser when she was queen
The lion had never been king, I ween.
But ever since storms began to lower
Beauty on earth hath been second to Power."
And this is the song that the Minstrel sung,
With the silver hair and the golden tongue,
Who sung by night in the grim Earl's hall.
And they held him in reverence one and all.*



The woman was fairer than she was wise;
But the serpent was wiser than she was fair:
For the serpent was lord in Paradise
Or ever the woman came there.
But when Eden-gates were barred again,
And the fiery sword on guard in the East,
The lion arose from a long repose,
And quoth he, as he shook out his royal mane,
Now I am the strongest beast. . . .
Had the woman been wiser when she was queen
The lion had never been king, I ween.
But ever since storms began to lower
Beauty on earth hath been second to Power.




And so she died, — the pale-faced girl.
And, for nine days after that, the Earl
Fumed and fret, and raved and swore,
Pacing up and down the chamber floor,
And tearing his black beard as he went,
In the fit of his sullen discontent.
And the Seneschal said it was fearful to hear him;
And not even the weather-worn Warden went near him;
And the shock-headed Pages huddled anear,
And bit their white lips till they bled, for fear.



And so she died,
— the pale-faced girl.



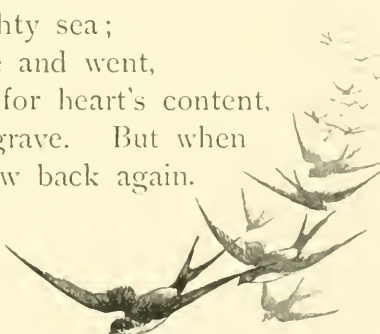
But at last he bade them lift her lightly,
And bury her by the gray sea-shore,
Where the winds that blew from her own land nightly
Might wail round her grave through the wild rocks hoar.
So they lifted her lightly at dead of night,
And bore her down by the long torch-light, —
Lank-haired faces, sallow and keen,
That burned out of the glassy pools between
The splashing sands which, as they plunged through,
The coffin-lead weighed them down into;
And their feet, as they plucked them up, left pits
Which the water oozed into and out of by fits —
— And so to the deep-mouthed bay's black brim,
Where the pale priests, all white-stoled and dim,
Lifted the cross and chanted the hymn,
That her soul might have peace when her bones were
dust,
And her name be written among the Just.
The Warden walked after the Seneschal grim;
And the shock-headed Pages walked after him:
And with mattock and spade a grave was made,
Where they carved the cross, and they wrote her name,
And, returning each by the way that he came,
They left her under the bare black thorn.



The salt sea-wind sang shrill in the head of it;
 And the bitter night grew chill with the dread of it;
 When the great round moon rose up forlorn
 From the reefs, and whitened towards the morn.
 For the forkèd tree, as the bleak blast took it,
 Howled through it, and beat it, and bit it, and shook it,
 Like a living thing bewitched and bedeviled,
 Visibly shrunk, and shuddered and shrivelled.



And again the swallow, that false new-comer,
 Fluttered over the sea in the front of the summer;
 A careless singer, as he should be
 That only skimmeth the mighty sea;
 Dipped his wings as he came and went,
 And chirruped and twittered for heart's content,
 And built on the new-made grave. But when
 The Summer was over he flew back again.



And the Earl, as years went by, and his life
Grew listless, took him another wife :
And the Seneschal grim and the Warden gray
Walked about in their wonted way :
And the lean-jawed shock-haired Pages too
Sung and swilled as they used to do.
And the grooms and the squires gamed and swore
And quarrelled again as they quarrelled before ;
And the flowers decayed in their dismal beds,
And dropped off from their lean shanks one by one,
Till nothing was left but the stalks and the heads,
Clumped into heaps, or ripped into shreds,
To steam into salt in the sickly sun.

And the cattle lowed late up the glimmering plain,
Or dipped knee-deep, and splashed themselves
In the pools spat out by the spiteful main,
Wallowing in sandy dikes and delves :
And the blear-eyed filmy sea did boom
With his old mysterious hungering sound :
And the wet wind wailed in the chinks of the tomb,
Till the weeds in the surf were drenched and drowned.
But once a stranger came over the wave,
And paused by the pale-faced Lady's grave.



It was when, just about to set,
A sadness held the sinking sun.
The moon delayed to shine as yet:
The Ave-Mary chime was done:
And from the bell-tower leaned the ringers;

And in the chancel paused the singers,
With lingering looks, and claspèd fingers :
And the day reluctantly turned to his rest,
Like some untold life, that leaves exprest
But the half of its hungering love ere it close :
So he went sadly toward his repose
Deep in the heart of the slumbrous waves
Kindled far off in the desolate West.
And the breeze sprang up in the cool sea-caves,
The castle stood with its courts in shade,
And all its toothèd towers imprest
On the sorrowful light that sunset made, —
Such a light as sleeps shut up in the breast
Of some pining crimson-hearted rose,
Which, as you gaze at it, grows and grows
And all the warm leaves overflows ;
Leaving its sweet source still to be guest.
The crumpled shadow of the thorn
Crawled over the sand-heaps raggedly,
And over the gray stone cross forlorn,
And on to that one man musing there
Moveless, while o'er him the night crept on,
And the hot yellow stars, slowly, one after one,
Mounted into the dark blue air
And brightened, and brightened. Then suddenly,
And sadly and silently,
Down the dim breezy brink of the sea sank the sun.



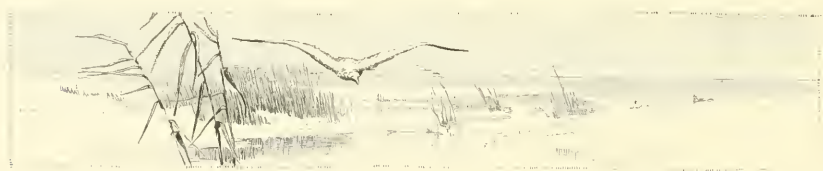
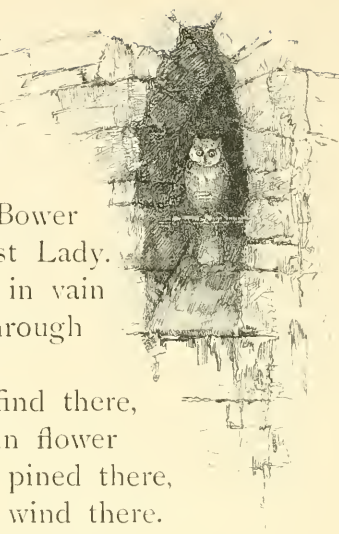
The castle stood with its courts -
- in shade,
And all its rook'd towers impress'd
On the sorrowful light
that sunset made, -



Ere the moon was abroad, the owl
Made himself heard in
the echoing tower
Three times, four times. The bat
with his cowl

Came and went round the lonely Bower
Where dwelt of yore the Earl's lost Lady.
There night after night, for years, in vain
The lingering moon had looked through
the pane.

And missed the face she used to find there,
White and wan like some mountain flower
In its rocky nook, as it paled and pined there,
Only known to the moon and the wind there.
Lights flitted faint in the halls down lower
From lattice to lattice, and then glowed steady.
The dipping gull: and the long gray pool:
And the reed that shows which way the breeze blows cool,
From the wide warm sea to the low black land:
And the wave makes no sound on the soft yellow sand:
But the inland shallows sharp and small
Are swarmed about with the sultry midge.
And the land is still, and the ocean still:
And the weeds in the rifted rocks at will
Move on the tide, and float or glide.
And into the silent western side
Of the heaven the moon begins to fall.
But is it the fall of a plover's call
That is answered warily, low yet shrill,
From the sand-heapt mound and the rocky ridge?
And now o'er the dark plain so wild and wide
Falls the note of a horn from the old drawbridge.



Who is it that waits at the castle gates?
Call in the minstrel, and fill the bowl.
Bid him loose the great music and let the song roll.
Fill the bowl.
And first, as was due, to the Earl he bowed:
Next to all the Sea-chieftains, blithe friends of the Earl's:
Then advanced through the praise of the murmuring crowd,
And sat down, as they bade him, and all his black curls
Bowed over his harp, as in doubt which to choose
From the melodies coiled at his heart. For a man
O'er some Beauty asleep for one moment might muse,
Half in love, ere he woke her. So ere he began,
He paused over his song. And they brought him, the Squires,
A heavy gold cup with the red wine ripe in it,
Then wave over wave of the sweet silver wires
'Gan ripple, and the minstrel took heart to begin it.

A harper that harps thorough mountain and glen,
Wandering, wandering the wide world over,
Sweetest of singers, yet saddest of men,
His soul's lost Lady in vain to discover.
Most fair and most frail of the daughters of men,
Oh blest and oh curst the man that should love her!
Who has not loved? and who has not lost?
Wherever he wander, the wide world over,
Singing by city, and castle, and plain,
Abiding never, forever a rover,
Each man that shall hear him will swear almost
In the minstrel's song that his heart can discover
The self-same lady by whom it was crost,
For love is love the wide world over.

What shall he liken his love unto?
Have you seen some cloud the sun sets through,
When the lingering night is close at hand?
Have you seen some rose lie on the snow?

Or a summer bird in a winter land?
Or a lily dying for dearth of dew?
Or a pearl sea-cast on a barren strand?
Some garden never sunshine warms
Nor any tend? some lonely tree
That stretches bleak its barren arms
Turned inland from the blighting sea?
Her cheek was pale; her face was fair:
Her heart, he sung, was weak and warm;
All golden was the sleepy hair
That floated round about her form,
And hid the sweetness breathing there.
Her eyes were wild, like stars that shine
Far off in summer nights divine:
But her smile—it was like the golden wine
Poured into the spirit, as into a cup,
With passion brimming it up and up,
And marvellous fancies fair and fine.
He took her hair to make sweet strings:
He hid her smile deep in his song.
This makes so rich the tune he sings
That o'er the world 't will linger long.

There is a land far, far away from yours.
And there the stars are thrice as bright as these.
And there the nightingale strange music pours
All day out of the hearts of myrtle-trees.
There the voice of the cuckoo sounds never forlorn
As you hear it far off through the deep purple valleys.
And the fire-fly dances by night in the corn.
And the little round owls in the long cypress alleys
Whoop for joy when the moon is born.
There ripen the olive and the tulip tree,
And in the sun broadens the green prickly pear;

And the bright galingales in the grass you may see;
And the vine, with her royal blue globes, dwelleth there,
Climbing and hanging deliciously
By every doorway and lone latticed chamber,
Where the damsel-fly flits, and the heavy brown bee
Hums alone, and the quick lizards rustle and clamber.
And all things, there, live and rejoice together,
From the frail peach-blossom that first appears
When birds are about in the blue summer weather,
To the oak that has lived through his eight hundred years.
And the castles are built on the hills, not the plains.
(And the wild wind-flowers burn about in the courts there)
They are white and undrenched by the gray winter rains.
And the swallows, and all things, are blithe at their sports there.
Oh for one moment, at sunset, to stand
Far, far away, in that dear distant land
Whence they bore her, — the loveliest lady that ever
Crossed the bleak ocean. Oh, nevermore, never,
Shall she stand with her feet in the warm dry grasses
Where the faint balm-heaving breeze heavily passes
And the white lotus-flower leans lone on the river.

Rare were the gems which she had for her dower.
But all the wild-flowers she left behind her.
— A broken heart and a rose-roofed bower.
Oh, oft, and in many a desolate hour,
The cold strange faces she sees shall remind her
Of hearts that were warmer, and smiles that were kinder,
Lost, like the roses they plucked from her bower!
Lonely and far from her own land they laid her!
— A swallow flew over the sea to find her.
Ah cold, cold and narrow, the bed that they made her!
The swallow went forth with the summer to find her.
The summer and the swallow came back o'er the sea,
And strange were the tidings the bird brought to me.

And the minstrel sung, and they praised and listened, —
Gazed and praised while the minstrel sung.
Flusht was each cheek, and each fixt eye glistened,
And husht was each voice to the minstrel's tongue.
But the Earl grew paler more and more
As the song of the Singer grew louder and clearer;
And so dumb was the hall, you might hear the roar
Of the sea in its pauses grow nearer and drearer.
And . . . hush! hush! hush!
Oh, was it the wind? or was it the rush
Of the restless waters that tumble and splash
On the wild sea-rocks? or was it the crash
Of stones on the old wet bridge up there?
Or the sound of the tempest come over the main?
— Nay, but just now the night was fair.
Was it the march of the midnight rain
Clattering down in the courts? or the crash
Of armor yonder? . . . Listen again!

Can it be lightning? — can it be thunder?
For a light is all round the lurid hall
That reddens and reddens the windows all,
And far away you may hear the fall
As of rafter and boulder splitting asunder.
It is not the thunder, and it is not the lightning
To which the castle is sounding and brightening,
But something worse than lightning or thunder;
For what is this that is coming yonder?





And the Minstrel sung, and they listened and he heard,
 Gazed and prais'd while the Minstrel sung,
 Flushed was each cheek, and each fixed its glance on
 And hushed was each voice to the Minstrel's tongue.
 But the Hall grew paler more and more,
 As the song of the Singer grew faster and clearer,
 And so dumb was the hall, you might hear the roar
 Of the sea in its pauses grow nearer and drearer.



Which way? Here! Where?
Call the men!... Is it there?
Call them out! Ring the bell!
Ring the Fiend back to Hell!
Ring, ring the alarum for mercy!... Too late!
It has crawled up the walls—it has burst in the gate—
It looks through the windows—it creeps near the hall—
Near, more near—red and clear—
It is here!
Now the saints save us all!

And little, in truth, boots it ringing the bell.
For the fire is loose on its way one may tell
By the hot simmering whispers and humming up there
In the oak-beams and rafters. Now one of the Squires
His elbow hath thrust through the half-smouldered door,—
Such a hole as some rat for his brown wife might bore,—
And straightway in snaky, white, wavering spires
The thin smoke twirls through, and spreads eddying in
gyres
Here and there toucht with vanishing tints from the glare
That has swathed in its rose-light the sharp turret stair.
Soon the door ruined through: and in tumbled a cloud
Of black vapor. And first 't was all blackness, and then
The quick forkèd fires leapt out from their shroud
In the blackness: and through it rushed in the armed
men
From the court-yard. And then there was flying and
fighting,
And praying and cursing,—confusion confounded.
Each man, at wild hazard, through smoke ramparts smiting,
Has struck... is it friend? is it foe? Who is wounded?

Which way?

Here! Where?

Call the men!... Is it there?

Call them out! Ring the bell!

Ring the Fiend back to tell!

Ring, ring the alarm for mercy! Too late!

It has crawled up the walls — it has burst in the gate —

It looks in the windows — it creeps near the hall —

Near, more near — red and clear —

It is here!

Now the saints save us all!



But the Earl, — who last saw him? Who cares? who knows?
Some one, no doubt, by the weight of his blows.

And they all, at times, heard his oath, — so they swore: —
Such a cry as some speared wild beast might give vent to
When the lean dogs are on him, and forth with that roar
Of desolate wrath, the life is sent too.

If he die, he will die with the dying about him,
And his red wet sword in his hand, never doubt him:
If he live, perchance he will bear his new bride
Through them all, past the bridge, to the wild seaside.
And there, whether he leave, or keep his wife still,
There 's the free sea round him, new lands, and new life
still.

And . . . but ah, the red light there! And high up and
higher

The soft, warm, vivid sparkles crowd kindling, and wander
Far away down the breathless blue cone of the night.

Saints! can it be that the ships are on fire,
Those fierce hot clots of crimson light,
Brightening, whitening in the distance yonder?
Slowly over the slumbrous dark

Up from those fountains of fire spark on spark
(You might count them almost) floats silent: and clear
In the steadfast glow the great cross-beams.

And the sharp and delicate masts show black;
While wider and higher the red light streams,
And oozes and overflows at the back.

Then faint through the distance a sound you hear,
And the bare poles totter and disappear.

Of the Earl, in truth, the Seneschal swore
(And over the ocean this tale he bore)
That when, as he fled on that last wild night,
He had gained the other side of the moat,
Dripping, he shook off his wet leathern coat,
And turning round beheld, from basement
To cope, the castle swathed in light,
And, revealed in the glare through My Lady's casement,
He saw, or dreamed he saw, this sight —

Two forms (and one for the Earl's he knew,
By the long shaggy beard and the broad back too)
Struggling, grappling, like things half human.
The other, he said, he but vaguely distinguished,
When a sound like the shriek of an agonized woman
Made him shudder, and lo, all the vision was gone!
Ceiling and floor had fallen through,
In a glut of vomited flame extinguished;
And the still fire rose and broadened on.



How fearful a thing is fire!
You might make up your mind to die by water
A slow cool death,— nay, at times, when weary
Of pains that pass not, and pleasures that pall,
When the temples throb, and the heart is dreary
And life is dried up, you could even desire
Through the flat green weeds to fall and fall
Half asleep down the green light under them all,
As in a dream, while all things seem
Wavering, wavering, to feel the stream
Wind, and gurgle, and sound and gleam.
And who would very much fear to expire
By steel, in the front of victorious slaughter,
The blithe battle about him, and comrades in call?
But to die by fire —
Oh that night in the hall!

And the castle burned from base to top.
You had thought that the fire would never stop,
For it roared like the great north-wind in the pines,
And shone as the boreal meteor shines
Watched by wild hunters in shuddering bands,
When wolves are about in the icy lands.
From the sea you might mark for a space of three days,
Or fainter or fiercer, the dull red blaze.
And when this ceased, the smoke above it
Hung so heavy not even the wind seemed to move it;
So it glared and groaned, and night after night
Smouldered, — a terrible beacon-light.

Now the Earl's old minstrel, — he that had sung
His youth out in those halls, — the man beloved,
With the silver hair and the golden tongue,
They bore him out from the fire; but he roved
Back to the stifled courts; and there
They watched him hovering, day after day,

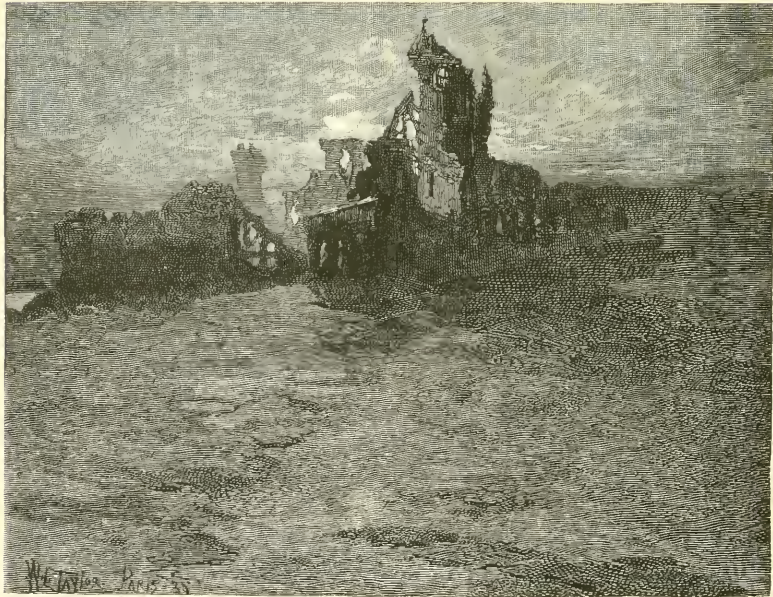
To and fro, with his long white hair
And his gold harp, chanting a lonely lay;
Chanting and changing it o'er and o'er,
Like the mournful mad melodious breath
Of some wild swan singing himself to death,
As he floats down a strange land leagues away.
One day the song ceased. They heard it no more.

Did you ever an Alpine eagle see
Come down from flying near the sun
To find his eyrie all undone
On lonely cliffs where chance hath led
Some spying thief the brood to plunder?
How hangs he desolate overhead,
And circling now aloft, now under,
His ruined home screams round and round,
Then drops flat fluttering to the ground.
So moaning round the roofs they saw him,
With his gleaming harp and his vesture white:
Going, and coming, and ever returning
To those chambers, emptied of beauty and state
And choked with blackness and ruin and burning;
Then, as some instinct seemed to draw him,
Like hidden hands, down to his fate,
He paused, plunged, dropped forever from sight;
And a cone of smoke and sparkles rolled up,
As out of some troubled crater-cup.



As for the rest, some died; some fled
Over the sea, nor ever returned.
But until to the living return the dead,
And they each shall stand and take their station
Again at the last great conflagration,
Nevermore will be seen the Earl or the stranger.
No doubt there is much here that's fit to be burned
Christ save us all in that day from the danger!

And this is why these fishermen say,
Sitting alone in their boats on the bay,
When the moon is low in the wild windy nights,
They hear strange sounds, and see strange sights.
Spectres gathering all forlorn
Under the boughs of this bare black thorn.





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